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"Two Sides of the Same Magic": The Dialectic of Mortality and Immortality in Peter S. Beagle's *The Last Unicorn*

Geoffrey Reiter

Forty years after its initial publication in 1968, Peter S. Beagle's masterful novel *The Last Unicorn* remains one of the most endearing and enduring mythopoeic works of the twentieth century. The novel follows the journey of a unicorn searching for her people, who have apparently been taken by a certain Red Bull of King Haggard. Along the way to Haggard's territory, the unicorn is joined by Schmendrick, a bumbling magician working for a witch's sideshow, and Molly Grue, the ex-girlfriend of a Robin Hood-wannabe. The unicorn is almost defeated by the Bull in their first encounter, but Schmendrick saves her by transforming her into a human woman, whom they call the Lady Amalthea. Together the three enter Haggard's castle to find the Bull again, while Haggard's adopted son Lír[1] falls in love with Amalthea. The novel ends as Amalthea once again becomes a unicorn, but now possessing the character to vanquish the Bull and free her people.

Beyond its popularity among general readers, the novel has also attracted more attention among literary critics than is common for a fantasy during its author's lifetime. One such critic is Alexandra Hennessey Olson, who argues that Beagle mimics the prose-poetry structure of Boethius's sixth-century *Consolation of Philosophy*, yet does so to propose an alternate consolation. Indeed, "Beagle's message is the opposite of that taught by Philosophy" (143). Rather than extolling an immutable, immortal ideal, Olson asserts that *The Last Unicorn*'s message is that "[a] person can be happy only when he accepts mortality and his limitations and does not long for an immutable world" (143). I believe that the first half of Olson's claim is consistently borne out in the novel. However, her final statement that "immortality is a curse, or a shroud" (143), while accurate to

[1] Editor's note: The reprint of "Two Hearts" in *The Line Between* spells Lír's name without the accent. This is an error that is scheduled to be corrected in subsequent reprintings, so we will use Beagle's preferred spelling throughout this article.

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an extent, misses the overall complexity of Beagle's work. Other critics have touched upon the relationship between mortality and immortality in the novel. Don Parry Norford suggests that "the immortal and mortal, joy and sorrow, life and death, are equally real halves of the same whole: you cannot have one without the other" (101). To Norford, the novel's ending is almost bleak: "Prince Lír loses his love, withered despite the blooming of his land, and the unicorn, again immortal, laments the loss of her mortal form [...]. We are thus left with the poignant and paradoxical sense of the separation between two realms that we have seen are one" (103). Yet even though the "two realms" *do* interact in the novel, Norford's assertion that they in fact "are one" is overstated and makes the ending seem overly grim. More has happened by the book's end than a mere separation between two mirroring worlds, though they are indeed related. John Pennington also reads the book in terms of opposites, especially in relation to William Blake: "immortal, mortal; innocent, experienced" (16). Pennington, however, focuses on the latter pair of opposites and how they inform the metafictional devices of Beagle's novel. And all of these critics either privilege mortality over immortality or suggest that the two are necessary opposites. In contrast to these readings, I believe the relationship between contraries—specifically the contraries of mortality and immortality—is at once more complex and yet better defined than has been previously suggested. *The Last Unicorn* and its 2005 sequel "Two Hearts" advocate a dialectic, a synthesis between the poles of mortality and immortality, suggesting that life ought to be lived in a balanced perspective that privileges neither the real not the ideal but exults in both.

First, it is important to note that in *The Last Unicorn*, death and mortality—far from being glorified—are presented as monstrous and terrifying, exactly as we encounter them in the material world. The first clear representation of death in the novel comes in the form of the harpy Celaeno, whom Mommy Fortuna captures, all the while knowing "[y]our death sits in that cage and hears you" (2:27). And indeed, Celaeno *does* kill Mommy Fortuna. The harpy is described in destructive imagery, called "'the Dark One,' the one whose wings blacken the sky before a storm" (2:23). Her "icy wings hung silent in the air, like clouds" (3:37) and at one point even draw blood from the unicorn. Holding her captive is "like trying to bind all hell with a hair" (2:23). Appropriately, as long as Mommy Fortuna is able to hold her captive, she is able to remain alive; but she dies as soon as Celaeno is freed.

In "Two Hearts," Beagle's belated sequel to *The Last Unicorn*, similar death imagery is used to describe the griffin that has been killing the narrator's friends. Like the harpy, the griffin's wings are particularly noted—they "sound like a lot of knives being sharpened all together" ("Two Hearts" 17). When Sooz, the narrator, encounters the griffin in the final battle, she hears "the rattle and scrape of knives [...] as the griffin shot straight up with the sun on its wings. Its

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cold golden eyes *bit* into mine, and its beak was open so wide you could see down and down the blazing red gullet. It filled the sky" ("Two Hearts" 41). Celaeno actively seeks to kill anything she can; so too does the griffin,

> whose golden eyes were saying into my eyes, "Yes, I will die soon, but you are all dead now, all of you, and I will pick your bones before the ravens have mine. And your folks will remember what I was, and what I did to them, when there is no one left in your vile, pitiful anthill who remembers your name. So I have won." And I knew it was true. ("Two Hearts" 44)

But the most potent symbol of mortality is the Red Bull himself. Beagle's first description of the Bull describes him entirely in terms of death and destruction: "He was the color of blood, not the springing blood of the heart but the blood that stirs under an old wound that never really healed. A terrible light poured from him like sweat, and his roar started landslides flowing into one another. His horns were as pale as scars" (*Last Unicorn* 8:95). As with Mommy Fortuna, who keeps her death at bay by holding Celaeno, King Haggard keeps his death at bay by holding the Red Bull. Yet Haggard's relationship to the Bull is complex, because his relationship to death is complex, as demonstrated by Schmendrick's attempt to describe it:

> As for the Red Bull, I know less than I have heard, for I have heard too many tales and each argues with another. The Bull is real, the Bull is a ghost, the Bull is Haggard himself when the sun goes down. The Bull was in the land before Haggard, or it came with him, or it came to him. It protects him from raids and revolutions, and saves him the expense of arming his men. It keeps him a prisoner in his own castle. It is the devil, to whom Haggard has sold his soul. It is the thing he sold his soul to possess. The Bull belongs to Haggard. Haggard belongs to the Bull. (4:42-43)

Haggard's men-at-arms also have difficulty characterizing the Bull, though they are afraid of it. For one, the Bull "is the true reason that we stay in Haggard's employ. He does not wish us to leave, and what King Haggard wishes or does not wish is the only concern of the Red Bull. We are Haggard's minions, but we are the Red Bull's prisoners" (10:138). They do not know what the Bull is, but know that he

> has always been here. It serves Haggard as his army and his bulwark; it is his strength and the source of his strength; and it must be his one companion as well, for I am sure he descends to its lair betimes, down some secret stair. But whether it obeys Haggard from choice or compulsion, and whether the Bull or the king is the master—that we have never known. (10:138)

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Another man-at-arms asserts that "[t]he Red Bull is a demon, and its reckoning for attending Haggard will one day be Haggard himself" (10:139).

The men-at-arms scuffle with each other because they cannot agree on the relationship of Haggard with the Bull. Yet though these descriptions sound paradoxical, perhaps contradictory, they all make a sort of sense if the Red Bull is viewed as a symbol of mortality. As a king, Haggard wields the power of life and death over his subjects, and particularly the men-at-arms. But because he is an old man—"seventy years old, or eighty, or more" (9:115)—death is always threatening to take him. So he is the commander of the Bull, and its prisoner, and a manifestation of it as well: "His eyes were the same color as the horns of the Red Bull" (9:115). He is both the master and the prisoner. And though death obviously existed in Haggard's kingdom before he took the throne, he seems to have made it more cruelly present for the people of his realm. According to Schmendrick, "the land was green and soft once, before Haggard came, but he touched it and it withered" (4:42). Haggard wields mortality, spreads it, and is captive to it, no matter how many unicorns he may keep or what control he may have over the Red Bull.

The association of the Red Bull with mortality is far from the only tenable interpretation of his character. In fact, according to Kenneth J. Zahorski, Beagle himself was not entirely sure what he intended the Bull to be, simply asserting that it "is all 'swamp,' that is his *unconscious* as opposed to the *conscious* crafting of his fiction, and that he simply doesn't know what the Bull stands for" (52, italics original). One position that diverges slightly from mine is that of Raymond Olderman, who suggests in his groundbreaking study of *The Last Unicorn* that the Red Bull is better understood regarding his relationship to fear: "It is the fear itself, and not the possibility of destruction, which Beagle insists conquers unicorns and makes the world a waste land—fear is always as big and as aggressively threatening as a Bull" (227). Ultimately, according to Olderman, the Red Bull serves broadly as "the archetypal image of the ambiguous and unknown force that has gained control of man's life. Beagle [...] does not really identify that force," though "it does have something to do with fear" (228). Zahorski too maintains that "most often he seems to stand for fear and its attendant feelings—the doubts, the uncertainties, the anxieties and apprehensions that impede our quest for self-fulfillment and happiness, that stand between us and our goals in life" (52). Yet even Olderman acknowledges the connection of the Bull to "unhealed wounds and pain" (228), indications of mortality. And while Haggard may *wield* fear, he is certainly no slave to it, even to his last moment, when he "fell down through the wreckage of his disenchanted castle like a knife dropped through clouds. Molly heard him laugh once, as though he had expected it. Very little ever surprised King Haggard" (*Last Unicorn* 13:193). Olderman concurs, maintaining that "the Red Bull

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tentatively serves him as it would serve others *who were without fears* because they were without compassion or hope" (228, italics mine). Yet if we are to take seriously Schmendrick's comment that "Haggard belongs to the Bull," which "keeps him a prisoner in his own castle" (*Last Unicorn* 4:43), then the Bull cannot be fear alone. The Bull must be something that imprisons Haggard, that owns him. And ultimately, though he does not fear it, death does claim King Haggard, as he has always known it would.

But if Haggard does not fear mortality, most people—like his men-at-arms—do. Yet mortality is especially terrifying when seen through the eyes of the unicorn herself; the human characters have had to live with the knowledge of their own deaths all their lives, but for the unicorn, it is fresh and horrific. Her first taste comes when she sees Mommy Fortuna disguised as Elli, Old Age: "She felt herself withering, loosening, felt her beauty leaving her with her breath. Ugliness swung from her mane, dragged down her head, stripped her tail, gaunted her body, ate up her coat, and ravaged her mind with remembrance of what she had once been" (2:24-25). Only when the illusion ends does she realize "that she had not become mortal and ugly" (2:25). But this is an illusion; she really *does* taste mortality when Schmendirck changes her into the human Lady Amalthea: "This body is dying. I can feel it rotting all around me" (8:107). To the once-immortal being, it is a cage, like the cage she is trapped in when Mommy Fortuna appeared as Elli, and she demands of Schmendrick, "Why did you not let the Bull kill me? [...] Why did you not leave me to the harpy? That would have been kinder than closing me in this cage" (8:106). Of course, the harpy and the Bull represent precisely that cage she now inhabits—a body that will die. Thus, the Bull does not recognize Amalthea as the unicorn, because the mortal Amalthea is already under his power, in a manner of speaking. To the unicorn, there is nothing more dreadful than becoming mortal. Raymond Olderman notes, "The unicorn fears the Red Bull not because it seeks her death, but because it seeks to possess her very being" (227). He is, in a sense, right—the Red Bull seeks, and for a time succeeds, in possessing her being, but he possesses her with that which she most fears: mortality.

So mortality is certainly a frightening reality in *The Last Unicorn*. But perhaps the most frightening aspect of it is that, ironically, mortality is immortal. Celaeno the harpy is frequently described as "immortal." The Red Bull is immortal as well: when the unicorn finally vanquishes him at the end of the novel, "she knew now that she could never destroy him" (13:189-90). Moreover, the Red Bull is also blind. Death is blind, because it respects no one—it afflicts all without prejudice. And it is immortal, for even after the tyranny of Haggard, people in the realm will still die, which becomes clear in "Two Hearts," where people die the same as they did decades earlier in the novel, despite King Lír's beneficent rule. As the Lady Amalthea insists, "Everything dies" (13:178).

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Amalthea's axiom proves hard to swallow, however, for many of the novel's characters. And in Beagle's world, the most horrid, corrupt souls are those who cannot accept their human mortality and instead strive to grasp or to hoard some form of immortality. The first such character the unicorn encounters is, of course, Mommy Fortuna. Mommy Fortuna hoards immortal beings, even as she is quite conscious that her physical end is drawing nigh. Her hope for immortality is to be *remembered* forever, to imprint her name upon the souls of the immortal beings she encounters: "You're mine. If you kill me, you're mine" (2:26). She boasts about how she has *grasped* the unicorn and the harpy: "You never could have freed yourselves alone! I held you!" (3:39). In the film version of *The Last Unicorn*, also written by Beagle, her aspirations are even more explicit, and she insists that Celaeno "will remember forever that *I* caught her, that *I* held her prisoner. So there's *my* immortality, eh?" (Scene 6: "Mommy Knows Best). That is precisely Mommy Fortuna's problem—she selfishly seeks to cling to *her* immortality, so much so that it literally kills her.

The same is true, in a subtler way, of Captain Cully. Cully also seeks to become immortal by imprinting himself on the memories of future generations. He crafts songs about himself, deliberately archaic and highly embellished, in the hopes that his "deeds" may live on. Cully, indeed, believes for a time that Schmendrick is actually "Mr. Child," presumably Francis James Child, an American collector of oral ballads. That would be Cully's dream come true, because Mr. Child holds the key to Cully's plans for a carefully-manufactured immortal legacy:

> One always hopes, of course, even now—to be collected, to be verified, annotated, to have variant versions, even to have one's authenticity doubted . . . well, well, never mind. Sing the other songs, Willie lad. You'll need the practice one day, when you're field-recorded. (5:60)

But there is little hope that any folklorists will actually collect Cully's bombastic, self-congratulatory verses; even if they found him, his poetry is so atrocious and so false that it would dismissed out of hand. And even if the verses were preserved, the Cully of the songs bears no resemblance to the real cowardly, egomaniac Cully, so the true man would gain no real immortality at all. His men recognize this far better than he does, one of them grumbling that "we have to sing those songs about wearing Lincoln green and aiding the oppressed. We don't, Cully, we turn them in for the reward, and those songs are just embarrassing, that's all, and there's the truth of it" (5:61).

Like Mommy Fortuna and Captain Cully, the people who live in Hagsgate are also obsessed with immortality, or at least deathly afraid of mortality. They have been "cursed" with great prosperity, but know that this prosperity will end when Haggard's castle collapses, an event that will be

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brought about by someone from the town. Rather than being able to live in the moment and enjoy their prosperity, however, the people of Hagsgate live in fear:

> How can we delight in our good fortune when we know that it must end, and that one of us will end it? Every day makes us richer, and brings us one day nearer to our doom. Magician, for fifty years we have lived leanly, avoided attachments, untied all habits, readying ourselves for the sea. We have taken not a moment's joy in our wealth—or in anything else—for joy is just one more thing to lose. (7:87)

The townsfolk seek to preserve their prosperity by not having children, figuring that if no one is born, no one can fulfill the curse. And naturally, all their efforts are in vain. A child is born, who becomes Prince Lír, who fulfills the curse, and the people of Hagsgate lose fifty years of prosperity without a single good memory of it. They, too, try unsuccessfully to grasp immortality.

The supreme example of this tendency is King Haggard. Like the people of Hagsgate, he simply cannot abide any pleasure that is not a lasting one—and consequently, he has no pleasures. The pleasures of the court, for instance, "are nothing to me [...] I have known them all, and they have not made me happy. I will keep nothing near me that does not make me happy" (9:116). Haggard dismisses the magician Mabruk and replaces him with Schmendrick for similar reasons: "A master magician has not made me happy. I will see what an incompetent one can do" (9:120). Haggard "adopts" Lír as his son with the same motives:

> I picked him up where someone else had set him down, thinking that I had never been happy and never had a son. It was pleasant enough at first, but it died quickly. All things die when I pick them up. I do not know why they die, but it has always been so, save for the one dear possession that has not turned cold and dull as I guarded it—the only thing that has ever belonged to me. (11:154-55)

That "one dear possession" Haggard talks about—the only possession that is not subject to mortality and decay—is immortality, the unicorns, which he hides in the sea. And this "possession" truly brings happiness to him. Upon seeing them, "[h]is face was changed beyond believing: delight coloring the somber skin, rounding over the cheekbones, and loosening the bowstring mouth" (11:156-58). He loves them because they are not mortal, not subject to time or decay or loss:

> I always knew that nothing was worth the investment of my heart, because nothing lasts, and I was right, and so I was always old. Yet each time I see my unicorns, it is like that morning in the woods, and I am truly

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> young in spite of myself, and anything can happen in a world that holds such beauty. (11:159)

But Haggard is wrong about a very important detail—though he tries to keep them, they are not *his* unicorns, they are not *his* possession. That is the same fallacy Mommy Fortuna made in trying to keep Celaeno. "You're mine" (2:26), Mommy Fortuna insists, shortly before the harpy kills her and escapes. "They are mine," Haggard says of the unicorns, "they belong to me" (11:158). Mommy Fortuna and Haggard are both old, wrecked individuals who think they can circumvent mortality somehow by grasping, caging immortality.

The one character who recognizes from the start the dangers of trying to seize immortality is Schmendrick. The magician knows full well that immortality is not worth clutching at, because he himself *is* immortal and desperately wants to be otherwise. When Schmendrick's mentor Nikos finds his young student too inept to teach, he says, "I grant it that you shall not age from this day forth, but will travel the world round and round, eternally inefficient, until at last you come to yourself and know what you are. Don't thank me. I tremble at your doom" (8:107-08). When Schmendrick is able to master his powers, "[t]hen the spell will be broken and I will begin to die, as I began at my birth. Even the greatest wizards grow old like other men, and die. [...] I told you I was older than I look [...] I was born mortal, and I have been immortal for a long, foolish time, and one day I will be mortal again" (8:108). Because of this, Schmendrick is most often the character who points out the benefits of mortality. When the unicorn is first transformed into the Lady Amalthea, Schmendrick has this exchange with her:

> "[...] I know something that a unicorn cannot know. Whatever can die is beautiful—more beautiful than a unicorn, who lives forever, and who is the most beautiful creature in the world. Do you understand me?"
>
> "No," she said.
>
> The magician smiled wearily. "You will. You're in the story with the rest of us now, and you must go with it, whether you will or no." (8:108)

Schmendrick, for all his awkwardness, recognizes what so many characters in *The Last Unicorn* cannot—that life is made of little, transient moments that must end, but that ought to be enjoyed with an immediacy that only mortality can provide.

But while Alexandra Hennessey Olson's thesis ends here, Beagle's book does not. This may be because she conflates the terms immutability and immortality. Olson is correct when she maintains that "in Beagle it is the love of the immutable which betrays people and makes them prisoners of Fortune" (141). Beagle accepts as an axiom that change is constant, and that true happiness lies in the ability to adapt to it, to enjoy the flux of the present. That is the

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immediacy of mortality that Schmendrick speaks of when he tells Amalthea that "what can die is beautiful." But it would be a misreading to suggest that Beagle privileges mortality above immortality. Rather, he allows that each is an equally potent force, and that each has a role to play in human life, though the role of each force is different.

One can infer the need for a balance by the way in which the twin concepts of mortality and immortality are often paired in the novel. This symbolic doubling occurs early in the book, in the butterfly's first description of the Red Bull. The butterfly, who can speak only in quotations, depicts the bull by quoting Deuteronomy 33:17: "His firstling bull has majesty, and his horns are the horns of a wild ox" (1:10). Significantly, the butterfly quotes from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. That same passage in the King James Version reads, "His glory is like the firstling of his bullock, and his horns are like the horns of unicorns." Thus, the very passage that serves in Beagle as a description of the Red Bull, symbol of mortality, also subtly alludes to the unicorn, the symbol of immortality.[2] Similarly, when the unicorn sees Celaeno in her cage, she exclaims, "Oh, you are like me!" (3:37). In the film version, she tells Mommy Fortuna, "We are two sides of the same magic" (Scene 6: "Mommy Knows Best").

Beyond the parity implicit in such mirroring, Olson's reading of *The Last Unicorn* misses the value that the novel places on immortality, as represented by the unicorn. As Kenneth Zahorski observes,

> Beagle's frequent use of the term "real" in respect to the unicorn seems calculated to remind us of Platonic dualism. According to the Platonic theory of forms, the everyday world, the world we apprehend through our senses, is a mere shadow world, mutable and concerned only with appearances, whereas the "real" world, that of ideas or true forms, is immutable, mind oriented, and concerned with reality. In terms of Platonic dualism, then, the only things that are "real" are the pure forms which remain unchanged. Thus the unicorn is "real" because she is a true form, symbolizing purity, truth, beauty, and the Highest Good. (50)

While Olson is correct in maintaining that *The Last Unicorn* rejects a full-fledged Boethian Platonism, with its disdain for the temporal world, it is a stretch to

[2] Beagle himself is clearly aware of this duality. In the first draft of *The Last Unicorn*, the butterfly alludes even more directly to the varying translations: "Biblical: a two-horned animal called *reem* in Hebrew. A. V. Deuteronomy xxxiii, 17. [...] His firstling bull has majesty, and his horns are the horns of a wild ox" (*Lost Version* 32). As in the final draft of *The Last Unicorn*, Beagle has the butterfly quote the Revised Standard Version. But the butterfly here recognizes the significance of the term "*reem*" translated as either "wild ox" or "unicorn." And the "A. V." indicates the Authorized Version, i.e. the King James Version—the version which translated *reem* as "unicorn."

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suggest that he is entirely inimical to "purity, truth, beauty, and the Highest Good," Platonic ideals that the "real" unicorn represents. For all the negative characters who seek to grasp or to hoard immortality, there are just as many positive characters who seek to pursue or to woo immortality. They do not look at it as a possession, as something to be owned or captured or held but rather as an ideal to strive for, or to give themselves over to. Such striving is not incompatible with living a mortal life, provided such lives are lived in balance.

One character who apparently has such a perspective on the immortal is the cat who gives Molly Grue clues on how to find the Red Bull. The cat knows right away that Lady Amalthea is a unicorn, and "[i]t was the sight of her that made me feel like talking" (10:140). The cat is therefore impelled toward positive action by the sight of the unicorn, and he recognizes that "[s]he is very beautiful" (10:140). Yet unlike the negative characters examined earlier, he does not seek to grasp her. Indeed, he refuses to let her touch him: "If she had touched me [...] I would have been hers and not my own, not ever again. I wanted her to touch me, but I could not let her. No cat will. [...] The price is more than a cat can pay" (10:140). Mommy Fortuna, Captain Cully, the people of Hagsgate, and King Haggard all destroy themselves because they want to hold immortality rather than to appreciate it from afar. The cat is able to retain his identity because he will not allow himself to fall into the same trap.

Haggard's men-at-arms, meanwhile, do not try to clutch immortality like their grizzled master, yet they are prisoners of the Red Bull, and mortality clearly wears on them. When asked why they remain Haggard's soldiers, they agree, "It is our age. Where else could we go? We are too old to be wandering the roads, looking for work and shelter" (10:137). But despite their age, they instinctively recognize the immortal beauty of Amalthea:

> They were all at least seventy years old, gaunt and limping, fragile as crusted snow, but all clad from head to foot in King Haggard's miserly mail and bearing his wry weapons. They entered hailing Molly Grue cheerfully and asking what she had made for their supper, but at the sight of the Lady Amalthea all four became very quiet and bowed deep bows that made them gasp. (10:136)

Yet the men-at-arms know that the human beauty of Amalthea, though stunning, is also tarnished by its mortality:

> "Be careful of the Lady Amalthea. When she first came here, her beauty was such that even this accursed castle became beautiful too—like the moon, which is only a shining stone. But she has been here too long. Now she is as beautiful as ever, but the rooms and the roofs that contain her are somehow meaner for her presence" (10:139).

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It is only at the end of the novel—when Amalthea has transformed back into the unicorn and once again become immortal—that she is able to have her full effect on the men-at-arms. Their youth is restored because "we told the Lady Amalthea that we would grow young again if she wished it so, and we must have been telling the truth. Where is she? We will go to her aid if it means facing the Red Bull himself" (14:198). The men-at-arms are now ready to live a full mortal life, yet it is a life that is unafraid of mortality, precisely because they have the ideal immortality of the unicorn, the ideal that transforms them from aged men to hale and hardy youths.

Molly Grue is another significant example of how the longing for the immortal can be beneficial, even if the catching of it proves more elusive, or even undesirable. Long the consort of foolish Captain Cully, she shows the effects of premature age when Schmendrick and the unicorn first encounter her: she is "a thin thorn of a woman," with "a pale, bony face, with fierce, tawny eyes, and hair the color of dead grass" (5:56). What keeps the sardonic Molly Grue from becoming like Mommy Fortuna or Haggard, or even her own companion Cully? It is that she is able to reach for the immortal ideal even as she exists in the mortal world. Whereas Cully dismisses Robin Hood as a baseless myth, Molly chases after the specters of Robin and Marian that Schmendrick creates with his magic. When Cully objects, she maintains, "[Y]ou have it backward [...] There's no such person as you, or me, or any of us. Robin and Marian are real, and we are the legend" (5:64). Robin and Marian are real to her as immortal figures to be emulated. The same is true, but more so, of the unicorn. When Molly first sees the unicorn, her reaction is, "*Where have you been?* [...] [W]hat good is it to me that you're here now? Where were you twenty years ago, ten years ago? How dare you, how dare you come to me now, when I am *this?*" (6:69-70, italics original). Yet she is still able to recognize the unicorn, where few others can, because a part of her remains untouched by the hardship of her years, the part of her that still yearns for more in life. It is this quality that causes her to hold steadfastly to the unicorn and the Lady Amalthea throughout their journey. At the novel's end, when each of the characters dreams of the unicorn and Lír wants to know what she told Molly, Molly replies, "I'll never tell [...] I remember, but I'll never tell anyone, if I die for it—not even you, my lord" (14:208).

Molly, like the men-at-arms, no longer fears mortality, because she has the dream of immortality. But no character is more affected in this way than Prince Lír. In his youth, he is something of a ne'er-do-well, lazy and unmanly. Haggard tells him that "you do nothing that becomes a man but ride astraddle" (9:112). Yet Amalthea's influence immediately changes Lír, and he becomes a hero almost overnight to please her. Molly explains to Amalthea, "He wishes you to think of him. Knights and princes know only one way to be remembered" (10:133). While this may sound eerily similar to Mommy Fortuna's obsessive

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desire to imprint herself on the harpy's memory, Lír is different, as Amalthea realizes: "No, he does not want my thoughts [...] He wants me, as much as the Red Bull did, and with no more understanding. But he frightens me even more than the Red Bull, because he has a kind heart" (10:133). Amalthea is partially correct, but Lír does not want her in the same way that Haggard wants unicorns. Whereas Haggard longs to *possess* immortality, Lír is willing to give himself up to it. Thus, he tells Molly, "I want to serve her, as you do, to help her find whatever she has come here to find. I wish to be whatever she has most need of" (10:131-32). Lír realizes, at least in part, the dilemma facing anyone who strives for the immortal: "The sight of her makes me want to do battle with all evil and ugliness, but it also makes me want to sit still and be unhappy" (10:129). This is precisely where the balance between mortality and immortality becomes so important. Mommy Fortuna, Captain Cully, Hagsgate, and Haggard all are faced with the immortal and choose the latter option—they sit still and become unhappy, because they cannot possess their ideal. But in the end, Lír chooses the former option, becoming a hero to battle evil and ugliness. His heroism leads him to sacrifice his very life for Amalthea, even after she has transformed into a unicorn again. "[H]eroes," he acknowledges, "are meant to die for unicorns" (13:188). As Raymond Olderman observes,

> When [Lír] is offered the choice between keeping the Lady Amalthea for himself and allowing her to become a unicorn again, his response is magnificent. He knows what his selfishness could mean [...]. He cannot hoard the magic that could heal the ailing waste land [...]. [H]e has come to see what it means to be human and to see the value of living in a mortal's world. (234)

Yet Lír is able to value his mortal life precisely *because* of the immortal ideal embodied by Amalthea, and he is able to maintain this balance throughout his life, a fact Beagle makes very clear in "Two Hearts." Though he is old, he charges the story's narrator,

> "[Y]ou must remind me, little one. When I . . . when I lose myself—when I lose *her*—you must remind me that I am still searching, still waiting . . . that I have never forgotten her, never turned from all she taught me. I sit in this place . . . I *sit* . . . because a king has to sit, you see . . . but in my mind, in my poor mind, I am always away with *her* . . ." ("Two Hearts" 30, italics original)

Old age and bad advisors may compel King Lír to "sit in place" more often than he would like, but it is the unicorn for whom he is "still searching, still waiting" who impels him to his heroic, self-sacrificial deeds.

At the end of the novel, the unicorn finally embodies symbolically the dialectic that Beagle has been establishing from the start. Initially, all that

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Schmendrick says about her limitations as an immortal being are true. Her early inability to enter into "the story," as Schmendrick calls mortal life, prevents her from living with any of the immediacy that only the threat of death, however horrible, can provide. She cannot experience the full range of mortal emotions and consequences. "I can never regret," she tells him. "I can sorrow [...] but it's not the same thing" (4:41). More importantly, she cannot love, for love is "generous precisely because it could never be immortal" (6:68). By the novel's end, however, the unicorn has experienced mortality, and has fully internalized these experiences. Yet Beagle does not intimate that she is somehow *less* for being immortal again; rather, she has become *more* because she has been mortal. Schmendrick, who throughout the novel defends his actions in making the unicorn into a human, apologizes to her at their final meeting: "'I am sorry, I am sorry,' he mumbled into his wrist. 'I have done you evil, as Nikos did to the other unicorn, with the same good will, and I can no more undo it than he could. Mommy Fortuna and King Haggard and the Red Bull together were kinder to you than I'" (14:207). The unicorn does not directly contradict him, for as noted earlier, mortality *is* a frightening prospect. And yet, the unicorn also sees that she has gained as much as she has lost; indeed, that some of her loss *was* gain—

> I have been mortal, and some part of me is mortal yet. I am full of tears and hunger and the fear of death, though I cannot weep, and I want nothing, and I cannot die. I am not like the others now, for no unicorn was ever born who could regret, but I do. I regret. [...] My people are in the world again. No sorrow will live in me as long as that joy—save one, and I thank you for that, too. (14:207)

This transformation is not simply a restoration of her immortality. And it is overly simplistic to insist that she is incomplete without mortality, that the two are necessary opposites. Rather, she has become something new, something greater, by reconciling within herself these two opposing forces. As the medieval unicorn was considered a Christ figure, so too is Beagle's unicorn. She is immortal, then becomes mortal, descends into hell—the Red Bull's lair—and becomes immortal once again, so that she can save her people. It is this last glorified incarnation—this synthesis of immortality with mortality's pain and loss and its transient joy—that the unicorn finally embodies at the novel's end.

And what is this immortality that the unicorn represents? I have avoided defining the term because I believe that Beagle leaves it deliberately ambiguous. According to Olson, "the modern author—writing in an age of little faith and a world with no presiding deity—says that we should ignore the immutable and take pleasure in the fact that 'everything dies [...] [and realize that] it is good that everything dies' [...]; for immortality is a curse, or a shroud" (143). But while Beagle is certainly not prescribing a doctrinal theism such as

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Boethius might believe, *The Last Unicorn* clearly indicates that *some kind* of immortality is valuable. Whether that immortality is an actual God, or some Platonic world of forms, or simply an aesthetic or religious ideal, something is required to elevate mortal human life, to cause us to strive, like Lír, to become greater than our current selves. Only by striking that precarious, all-important balance can we live full, happy, meaningful lives.

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